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Wangari Gardens: Gardening For Community, Health & Happiness In Washington, Dc

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Wangari Gardens

Gardening for Community,
Health & Happiness
in Washington, DC





Welcome to *Wangari Gardens*, a 2.7-acre park in northwest Washington, DC “designed, created, and sustained by the community for the non-profit benefit of the community”¹. The park is named after Kenyan environmental activist Dr. Wangari Maathai, Professor and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. Dr. Maathai founded the Greenbelt Movement, “an environmental organization that empowers communities, particularly women, to conserve the environment and improve livelihoods”² especially through the planting of trees. In keeping with this tradition, Wangari Gardens features a community garden with over 100 private plots, fruit tree forest garden, public vegetable garden, herb garden, medicinal garden, berry garden, strawberry patch, an outdoor classroom, and the city’s first public hammock.

Community gardening has experienced a spike in popularity in recent decades. Many major cities are converting empty green space into community garden centers publicly accessible to residents. Such garden spaces provide healthy fresh food to community members, a place for neighbors to come together and strengthen community ties, an opportunity for physical activity and connection with nature. Community gardens such as Wangari Gardens are integral parts of cities big and small, especially where healthy food access is limited and where residents otherwise feel a disconnect from nature. Wangari Gardens is unique in its combination of private garden plots and completely public garden space from which all local residents can harvest fresh produce, allowing community members who do not have a garden plot to remain engaged. Wangari also offers yoga classes to community members in an effort to build a healthier community.

Community gardeners have a lot to say about their experiences gardening at Wangari Gardens and how they feel they have benefited from their time here. This book presents some experiences and thoughts of a few Wangari Gardens community gardeners expressed in interviews. They discuss why they garden, why they chose Wangari, how the gardens have affected their lives and their thoughts on community gardening. Photos presented here were taken by interviewees and the interviewer and are reflective of garden plot holders’ experiences at Wangari Gardens and the bounty of their garden plot harvests.

For more information on Wangari Gardens and opportunities to get involved, please visit www.wangarigardens.org and www.facebook.com/WangariGardens or contact wangarigardens@gmail.com. The gardens are located at the intersection of Kenyon and Park Place Northwest, Washington, DC.

¹https://wangarigardens.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/wangari_brochure-20141.pdf

²<http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/who-we-are>

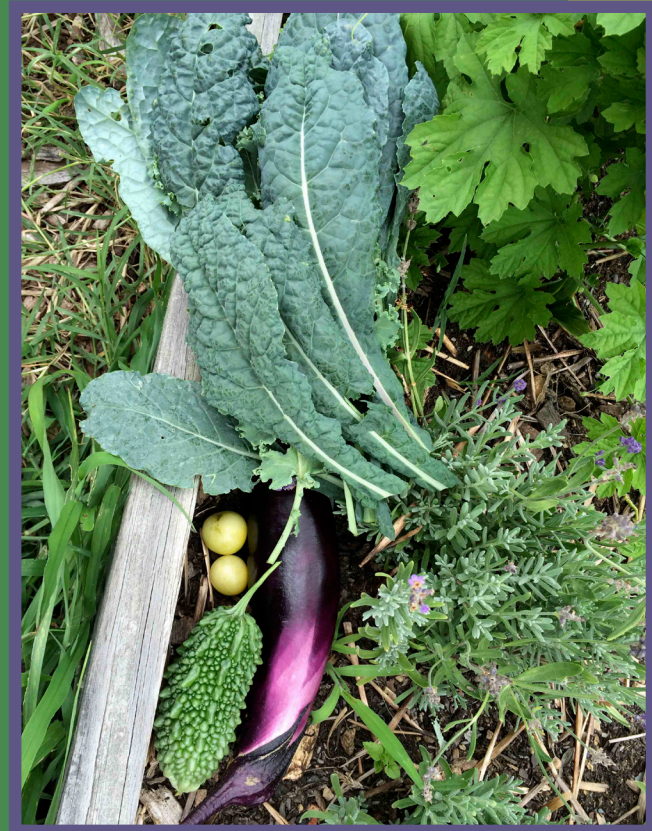
Producing Affordable, Abundant

The most commonly cited benefit of community gardening for is the abundance that a plot can produce, and the flavor of fresh

Affordability

"In the summer it's just wonderful when you can get fresh food and you don't have to go to the store as much. I think it's probably significant enough savings in terms of what we would buy at the store, combined with the satisfaction we get out of it, that makes it totally worth it to have a garden plot."

"I'm going through a lot of things right now, very stressful, a lot of financial concerns, but I'm able to eat and it doesn't cost me any money because I've grown everything in my plot. And there are other gardeners near me who offer stuff, who do swaps, and we have a huge community garden with tons of stuff."



"When something is in season, I'm not buying it in the grocery store... and that's the way it should be, theoretically. The grocery store is kind of artificial in a sense. You have things year 'round...That's not nature necessarily...Something will be in season in the garden and I can just be like 'Oh, we don't need any of those right now' and I'm not having to buy those in the grocery store...When the beans come in, we've got beans for a month...and the same with the carrots."

ant Food for the Community

plot holders is food – the affordability, the nutritional quality, the produce compared to store-bought fruits and vegetables.

Abundance

“From the community garden, when you pick the kale out of there or some green beans or strawberries, that’s all that I was eating that week. I made sure that was not going to get thrown away because that was precious. That was so much sweat, time going into that to make that grow and live...So I guess in that way it changes, maybe not even realizing it, that I’m not going to the store to buy X, Y, and Z things because I’ve got them here...I was just snacking on mulberries every day. That was wonderful.”

“It’s magical that I can drop a seed in the ground and walk away for a few weeks and come back and have all of these tomatoes.”



“Now I’ve got a basket full of market goods. I’ve got a bounty...Food, food, food. Your own food! A place to grow your own food.”

“It’s changed a lot of my affect of how we can preserve food. I’ve done canning, well, more pickling actually. I don’t think I’ve ever pickled anything because I don’t like pickled things, but it’s a way of dealing with all the radishes I had. I was like ‘I have so many radishes, what am I supposed to do with this?’ And I actually like pickled radishes now, and I’ve learned how to do that because of the garden. So it’s more about different ways of dealing with abundance, I think, that the garden has taught me.”

Food That's Tasty . . .

“[Gardening] changes y
much more important to v
single



“Gardening [for me] came from the desire to have the control over flavor and quality...just realizing it could be yet more flavorful and better, and it's actually true...This is the first year I grew cilantro without buying it in the store...and the flavor differential was amazing.”

“The difference in taste is crazy. These taste so much better [than store bought]! I had no idea! Now that I know, I imagine I'll continue to be purchasing less of the rock hard produce that's got an inch of wax around it and [purchase] more organic and local thing.”

your attitude...[Food] is so
you. You care about every
bite."

. . . and Nutritious



"I love it. I just love it...It's just so fun to eat the food you're growing. And to know it's organic and you're using good methods to make sure that it's really high-quality food."

"If I have something that I already having growing, then I'm not going to buy that at the store because of course it's better, it's fresher, and you know how it's been grown. So I would rather eat whatever I grew."

One gardener expressed wanting to be "consciously aware of what I'm putting in my body...[It's] empowerment. If you are growing your own food...you're knowing what you're putting in your body."

"I think what bring a lot of people to this garden...is that people want healthier food and that they know where it came from and that it's good for them. And more and more I think people are aware that the food they're buying isn't the best it can be. And so they want to be more involved in that process of where that food comes from and what they're eating...What will keep them here is community that we build, but what brings them here is caring about the food."

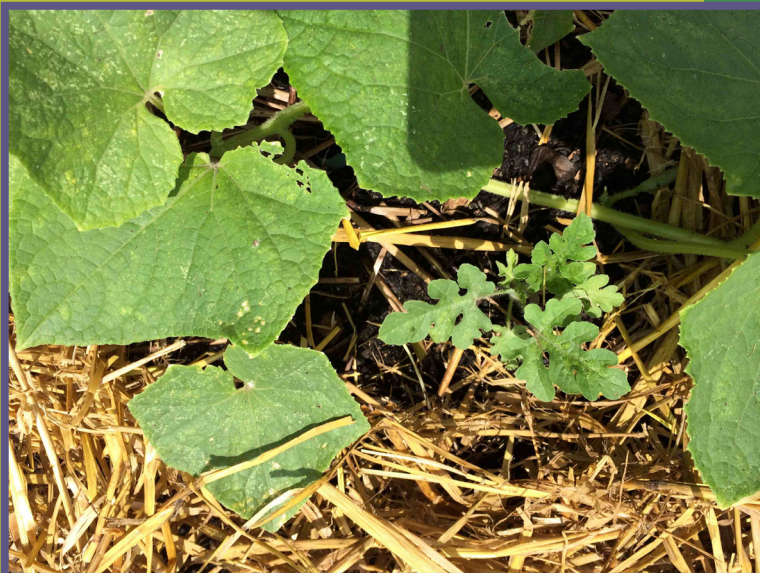


What's Growing





at the Gardens?



Building & Support

Gardeners “can make a new family. That is what community is for,” said one gardener. In a community itself, gardeners often discuss the positive influence of community gardening.

Feeling Part of a Community



“There’s a way to be involved whether you have a private garden or not. You can share in the community aspect of it. You can come to the workshops, the events that are hosted here like yoga, the movie nights... That’s a way to participate... whether you have a garden at home or not, you just want to come learn some tips on how to garden here. It’s that aspect of it, that it’s the whole concept of the experience spaces outside of the fence, being community, being open and open to the community.”

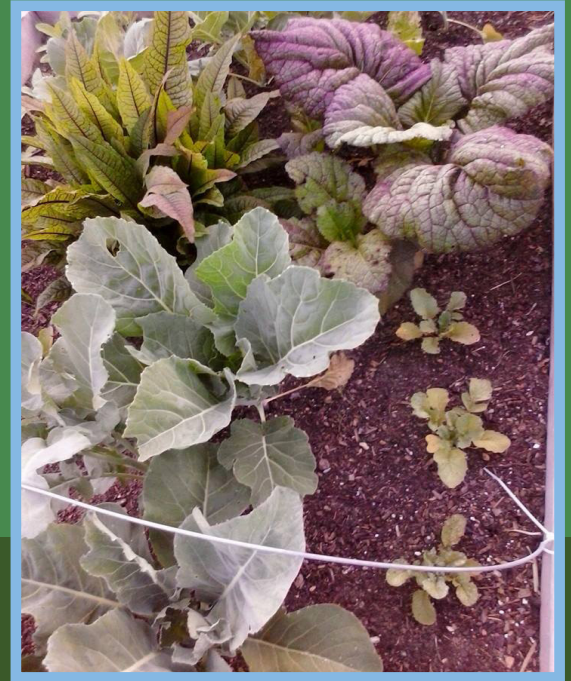
“Starting with dirt, starting with nothing, a community of friends, of people, some likes and dislikes. It’s an education, it’s a meet-and-greet, so it does have some therapeutic aspects of it. Counseling, nurturing each other, peer-to-peer... It’s a community effort. It’s reflective of people of different economic levels of life, but with common focuses and how people who come together can really build a community and how strong communities strengthen and breed strong neighborhoods and strong families. Each one takes back what they learn and it goes back to their household and they implement in their household... and everybody benefits from it. And I like being part of that cultural contribution, community contribution.”

Supporting Community

ener. In addition to the broad benefits of community gardening on the surrounding gardening on strengthening their interpersonal relationships and making new friends.

Strengthening Individual Relationships

"I'm spending a lot of time here so I'm thinking that after a while we'll be getting to know each other very well...Obviously we're all here because we have that common interest. And then just talking about plants...I think it brings people together in a more focused way than if you are just to meet people in the street...I think it should build good relationships."



"I've met different people than I'd meet in my normal day-to-day life, because there are different niches of people here. I've become friends with someone...who I wouldn't probably have met otherwise."

"I spend a lot of time here at Wangari. We've become neighbors. You can always come out here in Wangari and just have great conversations with your neighbors, sharing tips on gardening...You meet people out here in the garden from so many different places around the world and they are gardening right here at Wangari. And they share their produce with you if you're out here with them."



Unique Benefits to

The next most commonly discussed benefit of community gardening is community ties, promotion of social equality, and better

The Local Community

"I think it's great...especially for a city like DC...having a lot of professionals being so caught up in issues that are so far away from gardening and green things, I would say it actually brings balance to be able to have space like this and be engaged in this type of activity...Maybe if the politicians all had a little community garden plot, some of the political debates would be going a little better...It's really easy to lose track of real things and what really matters because you get so caught up into politics...A lot of people think there's only one way to do things...I do think that having a way to ground people in real things...would help reshape people's decisions."

"I think what is nice about Wangari Gardens is the community piece of it. And so I think that makes a big difference between just gardening in your own backyard and then being part of a community garden. Because I had all my neighbors...and then there's so many activities happening in the public garden space with the volunteering and everything. So it's a very different experience to be part of a community garden as opposed to just gardening at home...I appreciate that, especially in a city like DC where you have so many transient people and then you yourself. So I think it also helps somewhat to feel more integrated in the

"[The Executive Director] has done a really great job in giving about half the plots to people who have been long-term residents and I think that commitment is really important because it means...the garden itself is made up of people. This wouldn't exist if people weren't here. Gardening itself is a human activity. We need to plant these seeds and nurture them to some extent for them to be here. So if gardening is about the people, then having half the people be people that have lived in DC for a while makes it a uniquely different experience that gives everyone at least the potential to not be a gentrifier, and that's important...I haven't seen a lot of places that give that kind of potential to people. But gardening is one of the few areas where everyone from different walks of life seems to come together on...It brings so many people together. It gives people a place to start talking."



to the City of DC

gardening is community itself – the strengthening of community benefits specific to the city and culture of DC.



Social Equality

“Economic development. Widening the middle-class...Bringing people up from where they are and moving them forward. Opportunities for people who might not have anything else to do. Or loving neighbors...they walk here. This might be what they do, their survival tools. We don't know about each other, I guess we share here in the group, and again it's a good networking, it's a good platform for conversations.”

“I think it's a wonderful idea that we have these in every community and neighborhood...Throughout the city would really help in troubled areas in the city. If they were able to engage in something that's a community effort that can put their minds at ease, they can come out here and work and labors and see the rewards...There'd be a whole different dynamic for sustainability, self-sufficiency if these gardens could be just all over.”

Promotin

As the importance of maintaining physical and mental health becomes center stage as a way to promote that health. Gardeners cite benefits, an opportunity to incorporate more physical activity into their li

“I have suffered from asthma, bronchitis...I have diabetes...high blood pressure...anxiety, major depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and... chronic dizziness. I wanted to garden to help with my ailments and my disabilities...Gardening for me has been calming...I've been sick this year...but I was able to deal with it more...I've been able to manage my weight more...I think the combination of the yoga, gardening and better eating has helped with a lot of the ailments that I have.”



Relief from Illness & Chronic Conditions

“This is the only spot that has disabled plots and it helps because it's raised up higher off the ground so it's good for people that have disabilities so they can reach better.”

“It has already been proven that the more green vegetables you eat, the healthier you are. Because we know that cardiovascular disease is hitting people. Diabetes is hitting people. High blood pressure, cancer. And it has already been studied and proven that green leafy vegetables improve your health. So I just love growing...the kale, the collard greens, the parsley. I know that these vegetables are very beneficial to my health...I was diagnosed with high blood pressure and...my doctor considered taking me off my blood pressure medication. So I'm sure that the next time I go in, he will take me off of high blood pressure medicine because my blood pressure is normal...I can also say that it has to do with me gardening.”

ing Health

is more of a priority for individuals and communities, community gardens
benefits to accessibility for disabilities, improved symptoms of chronic condi-
festyle, and a potential solution for many health disparities in the city.

Staying Physically Active

“To me it’s very relaxing and certainly
the keeping physically active benefit
to it is something I like.”

“You’re moving your body in this space...
[the] yoga experience [offered by the
gardens]...we’re on the land, and they’re
not in a studio, and there’s no walls...
it’s like boundless...you can really stretch
out...I think that is mentally therapeutic.”



“There are lots of benefits from gardening here, but I think there’s
a health benefit in gardening itself because gardening is work. So
every day you come out...you’re bending, you’re exercising...
gardening keeps you flexible and that helps you with your health.”

Addressing Health Disparities

“Especially people of color, people in this city...DC is one of the healthiest
cities but for the majority of the people who live here it’s not. We suffer
from high blood pressure, diabetes...a lot of us are obese. And I think for
me it’s a combination of poverty and again, subsidized cheap, unhealthy
food. So I’d love to see people having their own plots and understanding
that you have other options. It’s trickier. You can’t just pop something in the
microwave. But it’s going to taste better, and in the end, be healthier for us
as a people. We’re just not doing well health-wise. And I’d like to see that
change...that connection to land and food, and culture and how a lot of
that is lost in the younger generations.”

Expressing

Community gardeners frequently cited individual benefits such as the opportunity to engage in a hobby, have

“It’s a very different kind of experience in my life that I don’t really get anywhere else. It’s just kind of special in that way. That’s why I think I keep coming out here...I’m enjoying creating this...I actually built up and created it...There’s not that many things that you can say you actually created...the most basic way to see results of what you’ve

“I’m just way more invested in [my garden than grocery store food], I’m excited! Putting this tomato [I’ve grown] in my mouth makes me very happy...I think about just having set a goal and accomplished it, just getting this to happen, it’s pretty great. And it’s definitely been a learning experience and I’ve really enjoyed that part of it too. So there’s just a lot more happening when I eat this tomato versus another tomato. I think about it and I think about the people who helped me. So it’s a lot more enjoyable.”



Creativity

ts from their time gardening at Wangari, particularly an
fun, and be part of a creative process.

where else...its
feel like I am
s that you can
've done."



"I first got my passion for gardening in terms of wanting to see things grow, wanting to nurture something...you get a hankering to try something because maybe the new flavor will be interesting or the new flower will be interesting...so there's the kind of intrigue and curiosity about what you can make grow and what's unique or different about that plant."

"I just saw how imaginative you could be with a garden. It wasn't restricted to just land, plowing...you could be creative with gardening...and I like that creativity. And there's no right or wrong way, necessarily, to make your garden look. It's personalized. It's individual...It's reflective of me. I built it...It's life growing."

Cultivating Em

Many gardeners describe feeling a sense of accomplishment through the learned and practiced



“To prepare my own food that I grow myself. It’s just a good feeling to be able to do that...I think it’s something that everybody should be able to do, to be able to harvest their own food, and should have some knowledge of how to do it.”

“When you’re growing your own food and then you eat it, it helps make you feel like you actually did something...literally that whole idea from farm to table...you’re the farmer and you’re the one creating your own food...it really makes you feel accomplished and makes you feel like...‘I’m part of this.’”

“For me this makes sense. And if I can expand this garden to a full acre garden or a fifty acre garden...have an actual farm and run a farm and run a school...that would be great....One of the reasons I really wanted to do this...was that this is a stepping stone in a bigger future. This is a part of a plan. The only way I’m going to know how to be able to grow my own food is to start growing my own food... Eventually I’ll get to that point that I will be a farmer and that’s the end goal...If this is a legacy where I can say I built a community garden from nothing, from just a piece of nothing land, now that’s huge. That is really powerful. That’s, to me, like building a school...but it costs probably millions of dollars less. But it’s just as important, just as educational, meaningful to people.”

Empowerment

sense of self-confidence and strength
activity of growing one's own food

"I think people see a disconnect between their ability. They see it as being really difficult and it's easy.

You don't have to have a very fancy garden. So that's something that I'm really interested in...I'm really into demonstration gardens...

Bringing people to see that it is pretty easy. And we can do it together. You don't need to do it by yourself...I think people here [in the United States] feel really out of control in terms of...food. You go to the grocery store and it's, everything is packaged...and I'd like to see that people have access to decide what you want to eat...how you want to grow it...But I think there's a disconnect. When I talk to my friends, they're just like...'that's you. You have your garden. That's not me. I don't have as much control'... But...I'm trying to get them to see, you can."



"Some people I know, they incorporate [Wangari] into a big piece of their identity, especially the garden leaders. You ask them to describe themselves and Wangari will come up in the first couple of sentences. So it's a sense of purpose, it's a sense of identity, it's a sense of belonging."

Engaging with the

Many gardeners find community gardening a way for their behavior, and live a “greener” life. In addition, communities connect with nature among the “c

Supporting the Environment

“The stuff that came from this garden, this is the most local, hands-on I can get...It’s important just because I think it’s just wildly irresponsible to truck a pallet of corn from East Texas all the way out to here...We can just grow it here. Also by buying local you have a lot more knowledge and control over...are the people doing this farming work being treated appropriately? Are there crazy chemicals on this? Probably not. If I’m able to have a conversation with the farmer who grew it and ask him about what pesticides he uses, I’m going to feel a lot better about putting that in my body...Having more control over what sort of ethics everybody involved in the practice ascribes to...I think fewer far-away hands on the process is better for human health [and] happiness.”



“Factory farming is just really horrible in terms of the crazy water use, the fossil fuels that we’re burning to truck this stuff around that doesn’t really have any nutritious value.... [Gardening] is a very small thing that I can do. Eat these instead of the ones at the store.”



“I do feel like I’m doing my part, taking care of Mother Earth by having a plot...keeping the planet green...I did want to be more conscious of being sustainable in my lifestyle...It’s working towards that.”

e Natural World

m to contribute to the environment, promote sustainable
ity members express appreciation for finding a place to
concrete jungle” of a city like DC.

(Re)connecting with Nature

“I’m just very thankful I found Wangari. This is a very meditative spot, which is healing in itself. Sometimes after we do yoga we just want to lay there and just look around Wangari Gardens, all the beautiful trees, and be thankful for Mother Earth and what she’s providing for us. And I just have this feeling of standing on Mother Earth and just allowing myself to make that connection, and that’s healing for me.”

“It is always nice to be surrounded by green things...For me personally, it’s always kind of been something, visually, like when you’re looking at a sea of green, it’s really calming and peaceful to me...There’s just something calming about being surrounded by plants.”



“I come here in the early morning and all the bees are buzzing and all the squash flowers are opened up right and it is beautiful...just like looking at the bountiful colors of tomatoes and peppers and squash.”

How Gardeners Feel

“I feel happier, I feel more calm, I feel healthier, and...feel more prepared to help others in the world, knowing I have the support of my plants.”

“I've always wanted to be in an outdoor space and oh my God it feels great! It's an absolute wealth...That's the wealth that I need and I love...[It] is great...know that we have urban space and we can cultivate it.”

“It's gonna sound cliché but it's very much that whole zen experience of it being just in tune with what you're doing. Everything else just comes tuned out...I can do my gardening chores and totally just be focused on that, which is kind of really cool.”



“It feels so good! It's just so much fun getting my hands dirty and feeling just one with the Earth...Knowing that what I'm doing is going to create something, even if I don't end up eating it or even if I mess up. I'm just so excited to be trying and to like see what actually works and how to do things...what grows, what doesn't grow, what I'm good at, what I'm not good at. So I really like that.”

While at Wangari



“Just like everything in life, you’re going to have ups and downs with things. So some days are really exciting and wonderful. And other days can be challenges...challenges to overcome.” What keeps you coming back on those days that are harder and full of challenges? “I can beat them. I can fix it. I can make a difference.”

“It calms me...I love plants. I love the color...I do think it is also spiritual...especially when I’m having a hard day, that’s like the first thing I think of coming home, coming here first.”

“This is a small city but it’s still a city. A lot of the work we do, it is a lot of mental, intellectual work dealing with people...It’s nice to be somewhere where there’s not so much mortar and cement and pavement...It’s not so many buildings and it’s actually green plants, trees. It’s actually a green haven in the middle of the city... We can come and relax a bit.”

Learning & Teaching

Not everyone is born a master gardener. Each gardener was once new and old at Wangari Gardens is learning from one another, and those who bring more gardening experience to Wangari Gardens are

A Life-Long Learning Process

“This is a...really low-barrier entry to actually get a garden up and running. I know literally next to nothing about gardening and I’m actually pretty proud of the fact that I’m actually getting something and not everything died.”

“The community is very devoted to gardening and devoted to sharing information with you. Anything you don’t know you can ask somebody else, you can ask the director, you can ask gardeners that have been at it longer...Everybody has been helpful...I ask other gardeners all the time if I don’t know...It’s a lifelong learning process and you need to learn from everybody that knows.”



“It’s really exciting to hear about those stories from other people and how they’re doing and kind of learn that. Because it also inspires me...You learn from each other. You have to. You can read and you can read and you can read, but sometimes it’s just looking over someone’s plot and seeing what they’re doing and seeing that that works, and you learn from them that way as well. It still seems like I’m learning so much every day.”

ing at the Gardens

ce a novice. An important and primary experience for gardeners both at the plots and at garden-hosted workshops. Those who e happy to share their wisdom with other fellow gardeners.

Sharing Experience & Wisdom to Help Others Learn

“The garden in me, it’s a beautiful chaos of things. And it doesn’t talk back to you. We do outside of this. And so here it will just do what it has to. It will either spread evasively or make you get it together...If you’re learning these tools as a youth...you’re able to have these teaching moments around like and making that connection with life and finding the time to really get out in space and organize, or reorganize, what’s nourishing you in that space for you, in your plot, in your container.”



“It’s truly why I’m here...That is my passion around honoring our ancestors in this space. Because they started here, in community, with different tribes of people...I think we’re getting back to that. So in my work with the youth, I want to help support that...Help them be the grandparents we came from.”

“It’s a very progressive space. It’s definitely a teaching and a sharing space.”



Methods

We conducted 17 semi-structured qualitative interviews with private garden plot holders during the summer of 2014 on-site at Wangari Gardens in Washington, DC. Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted an average of 33 minutes. Interviews were then transcribed with Microsoft Word and coded using the online-based qualitative data analysis software Dedoose. The research team developed a coding tree using grounded theory.* A portion of transcripts was coded by two coders and disagreements were discussed to establish standard coding practices. The primary themes are represented in this booklet and example quotes are used to represent each theme. Excerpted quotes have been kept anonymous to protect the privacy of interviewees. Speech disfluencies (i.e. “um,” “like,” “you know,” etc.) have been removed from quotations for coherency.

*Glaser, Barney G. and Strauss, Anselm L., 1967, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Transaction Publishers.



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